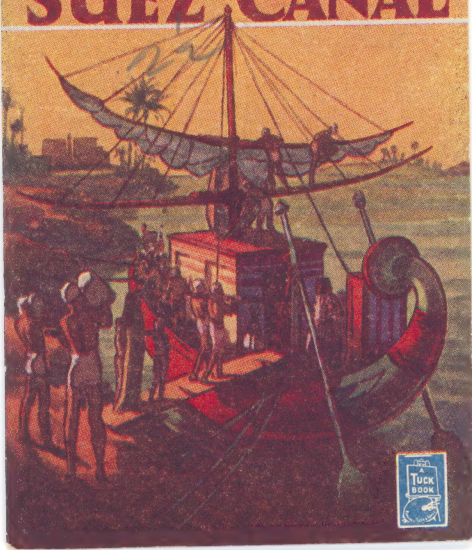


THE ROMANCE OF THE SUEZ CANAL



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The idea made a hit at once, and soon "Better Little Books" were met with everywhere. The range

(continued page three cover)

THE ROMANCE OF THE SUEZ CANAL



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Lighthouse at Port Said, near entrance to Canal

THE ROMANCE OF THE SUEZ CANAL

TO the present generation the name of the Suez Canal is taken for granted as that of something of tremendous importance to the British Empire, to be defended at all costs—our “life-line to the East.” Yet amongst the many interesting and, to some people, surprising facts about the Canal and its history are, for one, that Great Britain was almost the only Great Power which was against its construction, and for another, that though Britain has a kind of controlling interest in it, it was the work of French engineers,

and the Suez Canal Company is really a French concern.

Look at the map, and it will strike you at once that the Gulf of Suez and the Bitter Lakes are like disconnected portions of a great trench between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Geological movements doubtless made that trench and then partly obstructed it, and man being what he is, it was natural that it should occur to him, when he had begun to use water-transport, to try and join them. He did so, very long before our time—perhaps as long ago as 2000 B.C.

It is thought that the Pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites planned a Canal; the great Persian King Darius continued

the scheme ; Trajan the Roman cleared it and enlarged it for the passage of his galleys, and it is said that Haroun-al-Raschid, the Caliph of Bagdad who figures in the Arabian Nights Entertainments, planned a waterway on much the same route as that followed by the one we know. During the making of the present Suez Canal, a portion of an ancient channel was cleared and extended to bring fresh water for the labourers. (A fresh—or “sweet”—water canal now covers the whole distance, as does also a railway).

The Venetians are believed to have thought of a canal in the fifteenth century, because of Portuguese commercial rivalry

on the route round the Cape of Good Hope. When Napoleon was thrusting east to break the power of the British Empire, he saw how his ambitions would be aided by a short cut between the two seas, but before his project came to anything he had to evacuate Egypt and abandon his oriental dream.

Before coming to the story of the actual construction of the Canal it seems only fair to mention the name of Thomas Waghorn, an Englishman who, though by no means an enthusiast for the scheme, saw the benefit of a route of some sort between Cairo and Suez, and, thoroughly practical, instituted a regular land service, with

eight stage houses—the remains of which are still discernible from the air—with horses and English mail coaches. Of him Thackeray the novelist wrote, "If any man can be in two places at once, Waghorn is he." De Lesseps, the genius of the Canal, thought so much of Waghorn that he had a bust put up in his memory at Suez.

Waghorn is the kind of pioneering Briton whom we should not forget.

Much more might be written about old canal projects, but enough has been said to show that the man who realised his dream of the present water-way was by no means the first to visualize such a work.

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He was a Frenchman named Ferdinand de Lesseps, who had been a Consular official in Cairo and Alexandria. In his youth he had been a great friend of Said Pasha, whose father he had helped to make Viceroy of Egypt. That friendship proved most useful to the engineer, for when Said Pasha became Viceroy or Khedive under the Sultan of Turkey, he backed him through thick and thin, and de Lesseps acknowledged his indebtedness by giving the city at the Mediterranean end of the canal his name—Port Said.

Any details about a man like de Lesseps are worth noting, so it is worth while mentioning that his fine and daring horseman-



Labourers carrying away balls of mud and sand

ship helped him to win the respect of the Egyptians.

"I accept your plan. Consider the matter settled. You may rely on me," Said Pasha said, when de Lesseps put before him the scheme for the construction of a Canal and a railway across the isthmus. The terms of a concession of the necessary land were drawn up and signed by Said Pasha with the consent of the Sultan. Then the consent of the Great Powers had to be obtained.

The Canal was to be a French enterprise, and Napoleon III was greatly in its favour ; it was the British Government which raised objections. They said its cost would make it impossible,

and that it would be bad for Britain by increasing French influence in Egypt. Even Disraeli, whose name reappears in the story, said it was "totally impossible to be carried out." Gladstone, on the other hand, asked whether it would not inevitably come under the control of the strongest maritime power in Europe—Britain ; and whether it should not simply be regarded as a great commercial enterprise, beneficial to all.

De Lesseps did not wait for general approval or government grants, but constituted a Company. Britain, the United States, Austria and Russia bought no shares, but the French took all they could get, and Said Pasha

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subscribed sixty million francs.

Then the enthusiastic de Lesseps started work. This was in 1859, and on the 17th of November, 1869, the Suez Canal was opened with great celebrations, honoured by the French Empress Eugénie, who steamed through on the ship *Aigle*—and, it is said, wept when there was fear of a postponement of the opening owing to an unexpected last-minute obstacle.

Ten years of magnificent perseverance against all sorts of difficulties fill the gap between the two dates. Many a less determined character than de Lesseps would have been daunted. Perhaps the greatest difficulties were concerned less with engi-



A part of the Canal looking North

neering than with money and politics. The death of his friend Said Pasha did not lighten them; all, however, were at last overcome.

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How is it that Britain, after taking so little interest, came at length to have so much to do with the Canal? This is where the name of Disraeli, the British Prime Minister, reappears. In 1875, Ismail Pasha, who had succeeded Said Pasha, was in desperate need of money. He planned to dispose of his Canal shares ; £4,000,000 was the sum he wanted to raise. He was thinking of dealing with the French, but Frederick Greenwood, editor of an English paper, hearing

what was in the wind, informed the British Foreign Office. The Cabinet met, and the story runs that Disraeli told his Secretary to wait outside, and, when he got word, to go at once to Disraeli's friend Rothschild, the great banker, and to tell him that the Prime Minister wanted four million pounds next day. Rothschild, says the story, "took up a muscatel grape, ate it, threw out the skin and said deliberately, 'With what security?'"

"The British Government," was the reply.

"He shall have it," answered Rothschild.

Though some of our statesmen were doubtful of Disraeli's wisdom, his coup was on the whole

applauded, and pleased nobody more than Queen Victoria. It made Britain owner of 46 per cent. of the Canal shares, the majority of the rest being in French hands. Later we took the responsibility of defending the Canal in time of war, and repulsed Turkish attacks in 1915.

A very important point to remember is that the Suez Canal is international, in the sense that according to agreement it shall always be open, even in time of war, to any vessel of commerce or war, without distinction of flag.

Of course the Canal was of greater value to Britain than to any other country, because of our Empire, and as much as 70

per cent. of the shipping which passes through it in normal times flies the British flag.

Naturally, the most interesting thing about the Canal is the making of it. In some ways the making of the Suez Canal was less thrilling than that of the Panama Canal. The ground was less difficult, but it must be remembered that the engineers of those days had far less powerful machines for carrying out such work.

For many years it was believed that the waters of the Red Sea rose fully 32 feet higher than those of the Mediterranean. This was in accordance with the report of Napoleon's surveyors. Had this been the case, locks

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and sluices would have been needed. One expert thought a difference in level would help, as it would mean the flow of a slow current which would prevent the gathering of sand in the Canal. "A long channel," he said, "without any current flowing through it, would be a stagnant ditch between seas, enormously costly, wholly impracticable."

Eventually it was proved that the two seas are almost on the same level.

The actual work began on the 25th of April, 1859, when, in the presence of de Lesseps and four Directors of the Company, a small trench was dug in the line of the present Canal between



*The Northern end, showing the statue of
Ferdinand de Lesseps*

Lake Menzala and the Mediterranean. Things went slowly, however, and by the close of 1862 the only work that had been done was the excavation of a narrow channel from the Mediterranean to Lake Timsah, and the extension of the Fresh-Water Canal to the same point.

A difficulty then arose which needs some explanation. It had been agreed that four-fifths of the labour should be Egyptian, and this was raised by Said Pasha by conscription. Though the workers were well treated and relatively well paid, this system was disliked by the British, and, also, the Khedive who followed Said Pasha (Ismail by name) saw that the supply of

labour was too big a drain on Egyptian manpower. So a new arrangement had to be made, the French Emperor, Napoleon III, being arbitrator. The Egyptian Government paid a large sum of money to compensate for the withdrawal of the forced labour and the re-purchase of some of the land granted, leaving only 200 metres on each side of the channel.

It is worth noting that de Lesseps did all he could for the welfare of the workers, and at his expense places of worship were maintained for Muslims as well as for Christians of various sects.

Water had to be brought from a great distance on camels, and

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when the supply failed, as it sometimes did, there were deaths amongst the toiling thousands. But on the whole, and in spite of evil-smelling gases arising in some places from the soil, the death-rate was remarkably low.

A wonderful sight must have been presented by the great multitudes employed. The great writer and traveller, C. M. Doughty, who wrote that wonderful book *Arabia Deserta*, describes what he calls a "Babel of Nations, a concourse of men of every hard and doubtful fortune." He mentions one Arab who, though "not in need at home, had travelled 700 miles to be a trencher at Suez," and of a stern white woman overseer



*A felucca on the Canal near entrance to
Lake Timsah*

who watched her gang with pistols in her belt.

Another writer describes how some of the labourers worked, scooping up the mud and sand with their hands, then rolling it on their chests into great balls which they carried away on their backs, supported by their arms crossed behind them underneath their burden.

Long strings of donkeys, as well as camels and horses, were also employed for carrying away the excavated material; the camels were fitted with a box on each side, these boxes having bottoms that opened with a bolt to release the contents when the dumping-place was reached.

After the withdrawal of much

of the manual labour, more and more mechanical methods were introduced. The marvellous excavators of to-day were, of course, yet unknown, but those employed were wonderful for their time.

As an example of the ingenious devices used may be mentioned what was called the "long couloir," an iron spout or trough 250 feet in length, $5\frac{1}{2}$ wide and 2 deep. By its means a dredger in the channel could discharge its contents well beyond the bank. This huge spout was supported by an iron framework resting partly on the dredger and partly on a floating lighter. The mud and sand were forced along the spout by scrap-

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ers fixed on a moving "endless chain," and by water supplied by rotary pumps. Where the banks were too high for these spouts to be used, a still more ingenious and more complicated arrangement of boxes was employed, which, after being filled, were carried along and upwards, and tilted, by a self-acting contrivance, so that the contents were dropped in the desired place.

The digging of the channel itself was not the only work involved. A harbour at Port Said was necessary, and this involved enormous breakwaters — and there was no suitable rock to be had. So a substitute was manufactured, actually better able to



resist the wear of the sea than many kinds of natural stone. Huge 20-ton blocks of concrete were made from sand and lime cement, and as these were ready a giant travelling crane removed and placed them where they were wanted. Two breakwaters were thus constructed, 7,000 and 6,000 feet in length respectively. The Canal entrance between them, like the Canal itself, is kept clear by constant dredging.

Then at certain places great weirs had to be built to regulate the flow of the vast quantities of water required to fill the depression of Lake Timsah and the Bitter Lakes, 40 feet below the level of the Mediterranean, and now some twenty-five miles long;

two of these weirs were probably the biggest that had then been made.

There is a slight flow of water from the Red Sea to the Bitter Lakes, but it is not enough to damage the banks.

Though you think of desert as, broadly speaking, flat, it has its ups and downs, and a vast amount of cutting down and building up was needed. Some of the cuttings are as much as 70 feet deep.

Leaving Port Said, the Canal passes through the shallows of Lake Menzala, which had to be dredged, with some 20 miles of embankment ; then it goes straight for 11 miles, with some deep cuttings, then across an-

other lake, and then through the Serapeum Plateau, where a barrier of high hard rocks gave the engineers their greatest problem. The cutting of this meant blasting and digging a trench, from 150 feet to 300 feet wide at the top and 75 feet at the bottom.

At one time nearly 300 dredgers were at work, moving something like 3 million cubic yards of "spoil" a month, and a cubic yard may be taken as representing about a ton in weight.

If you happen to be interested in geology, you will like to know that all sorts of fossils—of the shark, hippopotamus, tortoise and whale—were found in the rocks at that difficult portion. So perhaps it is fairly clear that

at one time they were below sea-level, till the land was raised by earth-movements.

Finally, a few facts about the Canal. Its total length is about one hundred miles, the amount of excavation made being estimated at 2,650 million cubic feet ; some 25,000 workmen were employed.

The channel is 230 feet wide at the bottom, on its straight stretches, and 262 feet at the curves. Thus the biggest ships can pass while under way ; before a widening which was made since the canal was first opened, one ship had to tie up while the other passed. The use of searchlights makes its navigation by night possible. The

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maximum speed allowed in the Canal is 12 kilometres—roughly $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles—an hour.

Tolls are of course charged for ships using the Canal, and a charge is made for passengers—though if the passenger is under three years of age he travels for nothing through this wonderful water-link which has brought India three weeks' sailing nearer Britain !

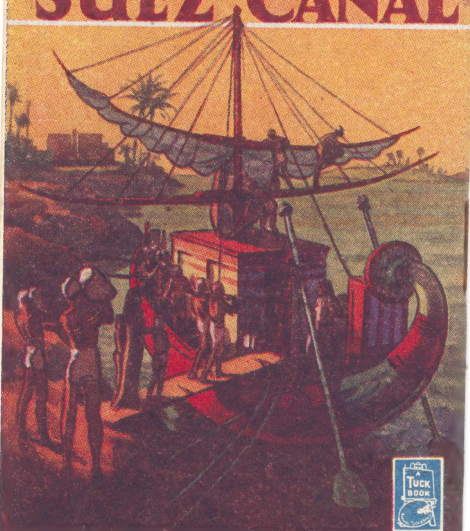
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